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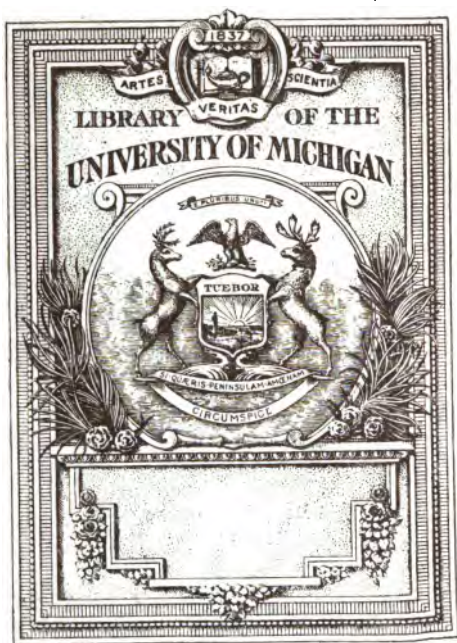
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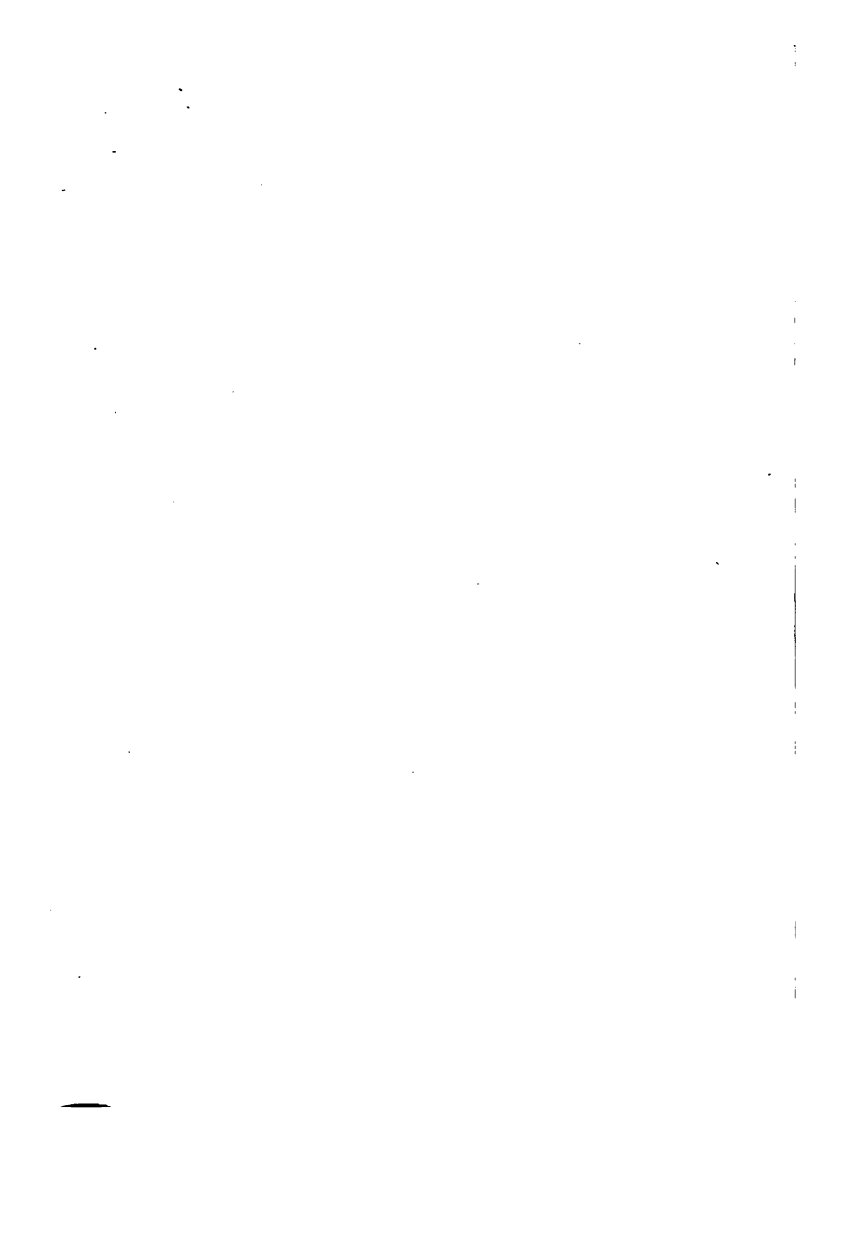
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**THE BACHELOR'S
CHRISTMAS**





“WISH YOU MERRY CHRISTMAS—AND HERE’S TO HER”

THE BACHELOR'S CHRISTMAS

BY

ROBERT GRANT



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**THE BACHELOR'S
CHRISTMAS**

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I

THOMAS WIGGIN, or Tom Wiggin, as every one called him, sat alone in his bachelor quarters on Christmas-eve, waiting for a carriage. The carriage was not late, but Tom, who was a methodical man in everything he did, had finished his preparations a little sooner than need be. His fur coat and hat and gloves lay on a chair beside him, ready to put on the moment Bridget, the maid, should knock at the door and tell him that Perkins, the cabby at the corner, was

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blocking the way. Tom had already taken out of his pocket two ten-dollar gold pieces and laid them on the centre-table beside an array of packages done up with marvellous care in the whitest of paper and the reddest of ribbon. One of the gold pieces was for Bridget and the other for Perkins. Twice the sum would not have replaced the crockery and objects of vertu which the Hibernian handmaiden, who brought up his breakfast and was supposed to keep his room tidy, had smashed since he had tipped her last; and Tom had, only two months before, undergone the melancholy experience of falling through the bottom of Perkins's coupé, because of the pertinacity with which that common carrier of passengers clung to the delusion that

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no repairs to a vehicle were necessary until it dropped to pieces. But as Tom would have said if interrogated on the subject by a subtler mind, Christmas comes but once a year, and though Bridget's best was not far from her worst, she had tried to do it, and Perkins, shiftless as he was, had driven his poor old nag one day into a pink lather in endeavouring to catch a train for him, which he had just missed after all.

Besides, Tom had had a remarkably good business year, so that a ten-dollar gold piece did not seem to him the dazzlingly large sum he had regarded it ten years earlier. He had lived in these same bachelor lodgings for ten years, and during that time had built up a very neat business by his own unaided effort, as his con-

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temporaries (and contemporaries are apt to be stern critics) were ready to admit. He had worked hard and steadily, taking only enough vacation to enable him to keep well, and shunting everything to the background which threatened to interfere with the object he had in view—that is, everything but one thing. And this one thing he had made up his mind five years ago was out of the question. Consequently he had shunted it to the background with everything else, and devoted himself more unreservedly than ever to the real estate business.

Ten years is quite a piece out of any man's life, and though Tom Wiggin was the picture of health, he was, as we say colloquially, no longer a chicken. He was stouter

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than he had been and had lost some of his hair, which gave him rather a middle-aged appearance, or at least suggested that he never would see thirty-five again. When he had taken his present room he had been a slim and almost delicate-looking stripling without a copper, whom any girl might be likely to fancy. To-day, in his own estimation and in that of his friends and acquaintances, he was a well-seasoned old bachelor who was not likely to ask any one feminine to share his comfortable competency.

Christmas comes but once a year, and Tom had for several years past been in the habit of recognising the fact in his special way. He was extensively an uncle. That is to say, he had two married sisters, one with five and the other with three children of

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tender age, and each of his two married brothers had presented him with a nephew and niece of the name of Wiggin. Categorically speaking, he had seven nephews and five nieces to provide with Christmas gifts, not to mention his two sisters and his two sisters-in-law, all of whom had grown accustomed to expect a package in white paper tied with red ribbon and marked "With love and a Merry Christmas from Tom." Here were sixteen presents to begin with, and there were apt to be almost as many more. On this particular Christmas evening there were thirty-five parcels in all, each done up with immaculate care, for Tom, like most other bachelors, prided himself on doing everything in a thorough, deliberate fashion. He had made his last purchase

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a fortnight ago, and had spent two entire evenings in putting the array of toys and fancy goods in presentable order. They were of all sorts and sizes, for Tom had paled neither before bulk nor price. There was a safety bicycle for a nephew who had set his heart on one, and the tiniest of gold watches for his eldest niece. There was a warm, fur-lined cloak for his dead mother's oldest friend, a spinster lady who had small means wherewith to keep herself comfortable in a cold world, and a case of marvellous port for his old chum, Belden, who would see that it was not wasted on unappreciative palates. Everything was ready for the summons from Perkins, the cabby, and Tom, bald-headed bachelor that he was, was fuming a little in spite of

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the fact that it still lacked three minutes of the hour appointed for departure.

The clock in the neighbouring church tower, whose tones were plainly audible in the sky parlours which he called his home, had only just struck five when the tramp of feet followed by a knock announced the joint arrival of Bridget and Perkins, to whom he had intrusted the duty of helping him to carry his precious parcels down three flights of stairs to the attendant cab. This was the sixth consecutive year Bridget and Perkins had done the same thing, and they thought they knew what to expect. But they had counted without their host. A year ago they had chuckled for forty-eight hours over a five-dollar bill apiece.

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Now, when they opened the door and presented their grinning countenances, their benefactor, after shouting at them a merry Christmas, proceeded to daze their intellects, of every particle of which they stood in sore need for the purpose of a safe descent, by tossing to each of them a gold coin of twice that denomination. For some moments they stood in bewildered, sheepish silence, examining their treasure, as though to make certain it was genuine; then Bridget, taxing her intelligence for a suitable expression for the wealth of feeling at her heart, exclaimed:

“And sure, Mr. Wiggin, it’s Bridget Lanagan that’s hoping that before the good Lord brings anither Christmas-day the proudest lady in the land will be yer wife. It’s me and

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Perkins would be the first to say 'God bless her,' though we lost a good job by it." At this prodigal outburst of expectation Tom Wiggin's countenance grew rosy-red, notwithstanding the incredulous laugh with which he received the blessing of his warm-hearted handmaiden and the nods of the less nimble-witted cabman. Then a shadow crossed it as though of unhappy recollection, and there was a tinge of real hopelessness in his half-jocular protestation.

"Many thanks, Bridget, for your good wishes, but there's no such luck in store for me. I shall live and die an old bachelor such as you see me now, and you and Perkins will be able to count on a ten-dollar gold piece on Christmas-eve for the rest of your lives. That is," Tom added

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by way of timely warning, "provided you don't smash any of these things of mine in carrying them downstairs. You remember that you broke between you last year a teacup worth its weight in gold, and the year before that large vase broke itself. If everything were to go down safely I should almost begin to believe that what Bridget hopes might come true. Careful now, and be sure not to lay that bicycle right on top of the gilt-edged dinner-plates for my sister Mary."

Whether it was that Tom's strictures in regard to the clumsiness of his assistants were exaggerated, or they were bent on causing him to repose trust in Bridget's prophecy, the thirty-five packages reached the cab and were stowed within and without,

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under their owner's supervising eye, without a single casualty.

"Faith, Mr. Wiggin, they'll be taking yer this time for Santa Claus, sure," said Perkins when the last precious parcel had been deposited. "Yer'll have to ride outside, sir, as yer did last year."

Evidently the gaping file of small boys which had formed itself on each side of the doorway was of the opinion that, if the gentleman in the fur coat were not Santa Claus, he was one of his blood-relations, for, as Tom climbed carefully to his post beside Perkins so as not to hazard the safety of the bicycle and the box of port, for which there was no room inside, they broke out into a shrill hurrah. Perhaps they too, or at least some of them, knew what they had to expect,

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for before Santa Claus seated himself on the box he plunged his hands into the side pockets of his fur overcoat, and then seemed to toss them high to the winds, as he cried, with gay good-will:

“Scramble now, you little devils, scramble, and wish you merry Christmas!”

What Tom flung to the winds was neither his fingers nor his thumbs, but a quantity of bright nickels which he had drawn from the bank for the express purpose. As the glittering shower of brand-new five-cent pieces fell to the icy sidewalk, the band of urchins threw themselves upon it with a shout of transport which drew tears from the eyes of the tender-hearted Bridget, who had remained to witness this established ceremony, and

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ought to have warmed the cockles of the donor's heart, if indeed they needed warming. Twice again he plunged his hands into his pockets and twice again the yell was repeated. Then seating himself beside Perkins, Tom gave the signal for departure, and as the cab rounded the corner a score of little lungs gave him back his merry Christmas with all their might.

It was a genuine Christmas-eve. The ground was covered with snow and the sleigh-bells were jangling merrily. The lamps were already lighted, and many a parlour window displayed great wreaths of holly, and now and again sparkled with little rows of candles in token of the precious Christmas anniversary. Perkins's coupé was on wheels, and

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his equine paradox was imperfectly caulked into the bargain, so that the world seemed to be rushing by them as they jogged along. Tom had a list which he from time to time consulted by the allied light of the moon and the street-lamps, in order to see that his itinerary was accurately followed and no one forgotten. At every house he dismounted in person and handed in his present. When he reached that of his sister, Mary Ferris, who was the mother of the five children, he had to make four trips up and down the door-steps. His sister, who was listening, recognised his voice and came into the vestibule to meet him, and her children, bounding in her wake like an elated pack of wolves, shouted with one tongue,

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"Hurrah! it's Uncle Tom."

Mrs. Ferris sent them scampering upstairs in double-quick time on pain of dire penalties if they peeped or listened, and fondly drew her brother into the small sitting-room which opened out of the hall.

"I can't stop, Mary," he said; "I'm on my annual circuit. Now let's see if I've got everything. Here's the bicycle for Roger, junior. They call it 'a safety,' and I trust it may prove so. And the Noah's ark, the largest one made, for Harry; and a musical box, which plays eight tunes, for Dorothy; and a doll which sings 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay' for little Mary; and a woolly lamb for baby Ned. And here's a trifle in the crockery line for you, my dear. If you don't like the pattern you can change them. Now

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I must be off. How's Roger, senior? Give him my love and a merry Christmas."

"He'll be at home very soon, Tom, and dreadfully sorry to have missed you. The children are just crazy about their stockings, and little Roger had given up all hope of a bicycle. You are too generous to them and to all of us. And, oh, Tom," she added, laying her hand upon his arm, "I feel dreadfully that we shan't have you with us at dinner to-morrow, but old Mr. Ferris depends on Roger and me for Christmas. He says it may be the last time, and that Christmas is the Ferris day. Thanksgiving is the Wiggin day, you know, and we did have a jolly time then; yet I just hate to think of your not dining with one of us on

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Christmas. How can it be helped, though, if all the things-in-law have family parties?"

"Why, that's all right, Mary. As you say, Thanksgiving is the Wiggin day, and things-in-law have rights, as well as those they marry. Merry Christmas, dearest, and let me go, or I shall never get through my list."

"Ah, but, Tom love, I do wish you were married," she cried, putting her arms around his neck to detain him. She was his favourite sister, and free to introduce dangerous topics with due discretion. "You would be so much happier."

"Do I seem so miserable?" he inquired, as he looked down at her and stroked her hair. "That's an old story, Mary. I've heard you express the

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same wish every six months for the last ten years. Every family should have one old bachelor, at least, and I shall be ours."

She was silent for an instant. "Do you ever see Isabelle Hardy, nowadays?" she asked, with brave insistence. "I have sometimes thought"—she stopped, deterred from completing her sentence by the shadow which had come over Tom's face.

He gently, but firmly, removed his sister's arms from his neck, and answered gravely, almost stiffly, "Very rarely indeed." Then, with a fresh access of gaiety, as though he were resolved that nothing foreign to the occasion should mar its spirit, he cried lustily, "A merry Christmas to you, Mary!" and departed.

Continuing steadily on his round,

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Tom delivered safely the case of port, and the fur-lined cloak, and brought up in the next street, in front of his brother Joe's house. Here he was to leave the gold watch for his eldest niece, a generous box of bonbons for his sister-in-law, a tool-chest for young Joe, and a first edition of "Vanity Fair" for Joe himself, who, though not particularly well off, was a rabid book collector. Tom had dogged an auctioneer for two days to make sure of obtaining the volume in question, which, so far as he could see, was very much like the subsequent issues of the same book to be bought anywhere for a song. He was convinced of his mistake when he saw his brother's face light up at sight of the treasure-trove and heard his delighted in-

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quiry, "Where on earth did you pick this up, Tom? You couldn't have given me anything I'd rather have."

"Glad you like it, Joe. If it isn't the real thing, I'll have the hide of that fellow, Nevins, who sold it to me."

"The real thing? It's a genuine first edition and a splendid specimen. It's adorable. I say, old fellow, it's an outrage that we're to dine with Julia's father to-morrow and leave you out in the cold. Another year I mean to strike and have a Wiggin Christmas dinner, Thanksgiving or no Thanksgiving. Mary and I were comparing notes yesterday, and vowing it was an infernal shame."

"Now, it's all right as it is, Joe. I've just left Mary, and I under-

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stand perfectly. You've got enough to do to digest your father-in-law's mince pie and Madeira without having me on your stomach."

"A regular old-fashioned ten-course feed, where you sit down at seven and get up at half-past ten feeling like lead. Ugh! Where are you going to dine, Tom?"

"No matter. That's my secret. I shall have a good dinner, never you fear. I must be off now and deliver the rest of my goods."

"It's an outrage—an infernal outrage," growled Joe. "Before you go, old man," he said, hooking his arm into his brother's, and dragging him in the direction of the dining-room, "we'll have a drink. I put a pint of fizz on the ice this morning for your special benefit. It won't take two

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minutes to mix the cocktail." There-upon Joe gave the bell-handle a wrench, and directed that the bottle in the ice-chest which he had ordered to be in readiness should be brought up, and in a very short space of time the white-capped maid reappeared with a waiter laden with all the necessary ingredients for the delectable beverage in question. Joe carefully measured out some bitters, pop went the cork of the Perrier Jouet, and presently the brothers were looking at each other over two brimming glasses.

"Wish you merry Christmas, Joe."

"Wish you merry Christmas, Tom. And here's to *her*." Joe paused an instant before he drank to add, "It's a big mistake you're not married, Tom. All I can say is some girl is losing a

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first-class husband. I say here's to *her*."

Tom, who had waited at the words, raised his glass solemnly. "There is no her and there never will be," he said, with quiet decision. "Still, since you give the toast, Joe, I'll drink it. It's not poisonous," he added, with a wry smile—"so here's to *her*." He drained his glass and set it down on the waiter, then for an instant stood ruminantly with his back to the open fire. "The drink was better than the toast in my case, Joe. My her must have died in infancy."

"Honest Injun, Tom?" asked Joe, as he gripped his brother's hand held out for a parting shake and looked into his face.

Tom's eyes quailed before the steady gaze. His lip quivered. "I'm an in-

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fernal liar, Joe, and you know it. But what's the use? She wouldn't have me, man—and there's no one else whom I want to have. So, merry Christmas, Joe, and God bless you and yours."

As he went out into the frosty night the clock in the hall struck half-past six. There were only five parcels left and the coupé was nearly empty. Tom opened the door and stepping inside, lay back wearily. Presently he picked up one of the parcels—it was a book apparently, from its shape—and laid it at his side. When Perkins drew up the next time, Tom gathered up the remaining four and ran up the steps with them. They were for his sister Kitty and her little company, and he spent a few moments indoors to explain matters.

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When he reappeared he said to his conductor, "114 Farragut Place, and then to the club."

Tom sat inside with the remaining package resting on his lap, nervously watching for the cab to stop. They halted presently before a spacious house, the old-fashioned aspect of which was heightened by the curved iron railing which ran along the flight of steps leading up to it. Just before the cab stopped Tom had taken a note from his breast pocket, and, after looking round him stealthily in the darkness, had kissed the envelope. Now he tucked it under the red ribbon of the remaining package, and walking gravely up the steps, rang the bell. There was nothing in the envelope but his visiting-card, on which he had written, "With best

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wishes for a merry Christmas." When the servant came to the door Tom said, "Will you please give this to Miss Isabelle Hardy?" Then the door closed in his face and he went solemnly down the steps again. On reaching the now empty cab he glanced over his shoulder as though in hope of catching a face at the window, but every shade was down, and the wreaths of holly were the nearest semblance to faces, and they seemed almost to grin at him. And well they might. It was the fifth year in succession that he had gone through exactly this same pantomime. Tom heaved one deep sigh; then he straightened his shoulders and passed his hand across his eyes as though he were sweeping away an unprofitable vision.

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"To the club," he repeated sturdily to Perkins. "And now," he said to himself, as he wrapped himself in his fur coat and put up his feet on the opposite cushion, "the question is how to make the best of a devilish poor outlook. I mean to have a merry Christmas somehow."

II

THOUGH it was dinner time, there were few men in the club when Tom entered it. Still there were a half-dozen familiar spirits lounging in the sitting-room, most melancholy among whom was Frazer Bell, a bachelor far gone in the forties, an epicure, but poor as a church mouse.

"Just the man," said Tom to himself, and he drew him aside.

"Will you dine with me to-night, Frazer?"

"Er—I have just ordered dinner, but——"

"Then I'll countermand it," inter-

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posed Tom blithely, by way of relieving his would-be guest from the quandary of accepting the invitation without loss of self-respect. "It's Christmas-eve and this is my outfit; I'm going in for as good a dinner as they can give us in honour of the occasion. I say, old man, will you do me the favour to order it? You know fifty times better than I what we ought to have to get the best."

Frazer Bell grinned complacently. One could almost see his mouth water.

"I'll do it if you like," he said.

"I wish you would. And be sure to put down the finest there is, and to pick out something gilt-edged in the way of wine; something cobwebby and precious."

"I'll try," said Frazer, with another

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grin, and he ambled off in the direction of the office.

Tom went into the reading-room and picked up a magazine. Presently he passed his hands across his eyes again, for the wreaths in the windows of the house in Farragut Place were grinning at him still. He said to himself that he guessed he needed another drink, and pressed the electric button at his side.

"Ask Mr. Frazer Bell what he'll have and bring me a Martini cocktail," he said to the servant. Then he shut his eyes and the grinning wreaths changed into a girl's face, a face which had haunted him day in and day out for seven years. He knew that he ought to brush that away also, but he could not bring himself to do so on Christmas-eve. He would give

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himself that little luxury at least, before he tried to obliterate it by talking gastronomy with Frazer Bell. Nearly seven years, verily, since he had seen her first! She was then a girl of nineteen, and he at the bottom of the real estate ladder without a dollar to his name. He had been crazy to marry her, and for two years he had followed her from ball-room to ball-room with a feverish assiduity which threatened to revolutionise his business habits and make light of his business principles. He was not the only one in love with her; there were half a dozen; but the one whose devotion he dreaded most was Charles Leverett Saunders, a handsome dashing beau, a scion of a rich and conspicuous house. He had watched her behaviour toward his

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rival with the eye of a lynx, and as he compared the notes of one evening with the notes of the next he had felt that she was more gracious to Saunders than to him. And yet sometimes she was so sweet and kind to him. But then again, she would be cold and distant, almost icy, in short; on which occasions he had felt as though he would like to cut his throat. A half-dozen times he had made up his mind to offer himself to her and know his fate, but somehow his determination, which was so prodigious in other affairs, had failed him. So matters had gone for a year and a half, and he had seemed no nearer and no less near to the goal than ever. He had said to himself severely that this thing must not go on.

On December 31st, just five years

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before, there was to be a famous ball, the crack party of the season. He had resolved that before the old year was out he would know his fate once and for all. Ten-dollar gold pieces did not grow for him then on every bush, but he ordered from the florist the handsomest bouquet of roses and violets which native horticultural talent could devise, and sent it to Miss Isabelle Hardy on the eve of the ball. She had promised to dance the german with him, and when he entered the ball-room his eyes saw no one until they rested on her. A frown had creased his brow, for she was on the arm of Charles Leverett Saunders, and was looking up into his face with a smile of happy excitement which had suggested to Tom that he was as far from her thoughts as the Emper-

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or of Japan. What was more and worse, she carried three gorgeous bouquets, but his was not among them. Where was it? Had it not been sent? If so, he would ruin that florist's trade for ever and ever. Or had she left it at home on purpose?

He fought shy of her until the german and there was no longer an excuse for him to keep away. Almost at once she thanked him for his lovely flowers.

"But you have not brought them."

"No," she said, sweetly. "I was unable to—I," and she had paused in her embarrassment.

"There were so many, of course."

"No, it was not that, Mr. Wiggin, I assure you." But she had looked a little hurt at his gruff words. "I had a

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very good reason for not bringing them."

There had been a piteous look in the girl's eyes as she spoke, which he had often recalled since; but then he had thought of nothing but his anger and the slight which had been put upon him. He felt like asking why she had not left Charles Leverett Saunders's flowers at home instead of his. It was clear that she did not care for him, and it became clearer and clearer in the course of the evening; for after a while they had sat almost tongue-tied beside each other. He had tried his best not to be disagreeable, but in spite of himself cynical sentences had slipped from between his teeth in close succession. He had seen that she was hurt and he had rather gloried in it, and pres-

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ently an embarrassed silence had followed, broken by the arrival of his rival with a magnificent favour proffered beamingly to the girl of Tom's heart. She had sailed away, and looking back over her shoulder, given Tom one glance—one of those icy glances which made him yearn to cut his throat. That was bad enough, but to crown all, when her turn came to bestow a boutonnière she made Tom carry her straight up to Leverett Saunders, in the button-hole of whose coat she proceeded to fasten the rosebud for which Tom would have given twelve months of his life.

Five years ago on the first of January! He had gone home that night certain that Isabelle Hardy did not love him, and resolved that she should play fast and loose with him no long-

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er. In the first hours of the new year he vowed that he would forget her, and devote himself to his business heart and soul. Henceforth he would close eye and brain to all distractions. He would cease for ever to be a play-thing for a woman's caprice.

He had kept his word. That is to say, his attentions had ended from that hour. The festivities which had known him knew him no more. He went nowhere, and the reason whispered under the rose was that Isabelle Hardy had given him the mitten. The whisper reached him, but little he cared that rumour was not strictly accurate. Was it not practically so? She had to all intents and purposes thrown him over, and he had expelled her image from his heart and gone on with his business, looking neither

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to the right nor to the left. Occasionally he passed her in the street, and on every Christmas-eve since the night of his resolution, he had left a trifling remembrance at the house in Farragut Place, just, as it were, to show that there was no ill feeling. Otherwise they never met, and here he was to-day, an old bachelor close on forty, getting bald and set in his ways, with a splendid business and a secret ache at his heart. And she? Tom had never known why she had not married Charles Leverett Saunders, as everybody expected and said she was going to do. Yet suddenly, without warning, that dashing gallant had gone abroad and had remained there ever since, doing the Nile, and Norway, and hunting tigers in the jungles of India, accord-

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ing as the humour seized him. And she? She was beginning to show just a little the traces of time, to suggest what she would look like if she never married and remained after all an old maid. He had been struck by it the last time he had passed her in the street. An old maid! Isabelle Hardy an old maid! There was bitter humour in it for Tom, and he laughed aloud in the reading-room, then, starting at his own performance, looked around him confusedly. He was alone, and his untasted drink stood at his elbow. No one had heard his harsh, strange outburst. He tossed off the cocktail and sank back in his easy chair to confront the vision. An old maid. And he was an old bachelor. And it was Christmas-eve. And what a gloomy, diabolical anniversary it

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was for old maids and old bachelors. They had no things-in-law to invite them to dinner. They were out in the cold and their room was better than their company. Jokes? Jollities? They were all matrimonial and centred about baby's teeth or Noah's arks. The only thing for an old bachelor or old maid to do was to ransack toy shops and then stand aside. Merry Christmas? How in the name of Santa Claus was an old bachelor or an old maid to have a merry Christmas? And why in time shouldn't they be merry if they could?

Five minutes later, the servant had to announce twice that dinner was served before Tom turned his head, which caused that functionary to reflect that Mr. Wiggin was getting a little deaf. He was looking straight

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before him into the fire, as though he were interested in the processes of combustion or the price of coal. He turned at the second summons with a start.

"What's that, Simon? Mr. Bell waiting for me? Oh, of course; dinner is ready. Tell him—tell him," he added with a feverish, excited manner as he sprang to his feet, "that I'll be with him in a moment. I must use the telephone first. I'll put it through," he added to himself as he dashed from the room, "if it takes a leg."

Whatever Tom was bent on almost cost him a bone of some sort at the start, for just beyond the door of the reading-room he bumped full into George Hapgood, a stout, dignified-looking man of about fifty. When

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Tom realised who it was his eyes gleamed joyously, and in lieu of an apology he blurted out:

“You’re just the man I’m looking for, Hapgood. Will you do me the favour to dine with me to-morrow? Now don’t say you can’t, for you must.”

“To-morrow? To-morrow’s Christmas, isn’t it?” was the inquiry, with just a shade of melancholy in the tone.

“Yes. And we’re out of it—two old bachelors like you and me. I’m going to bring a few choice spirits together to prove that the things-in-law can’t have all the fun. Say you’ll come. Here, at seven.”

“I—I was going to dine with my brother, but I got a telegram from him this afternoon saying that the

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children had broken out with scarlet fever and——”

“I understand, old man. So did mine. I mean—we’re all in the same boat. Then I shall count on you at seven.”

“Thank you kindly, Wiggin. I’ll be glad to come,” answered Hapgood, with a grave, courteous bow. Tom remembered having heard it said that Hapgood had never really smiled since his lady-love, Marian Blake, married Willis Bolles, twenty-five years before. He was a brilliant lawyer and an influential man, but he had never been known to smile, and he habitually fought shy of all entertainments where the other sex was to be encountered, as though he feared contagion.

“I thought I wouldn’t tell him that

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there might be women. It'll do him good to meet a few," chuckled Tom, as he pursued his way to the telephone box.

"Is that Albion Hall?"

"Yes, seh."

"Is Mr. Maxwell there?"

"No, seh, Mr. Maxwell has gone home."

"Who are you?"

"The janitor, seh."

"Is the hall engaged for to-morrow night?"

"Can't say, seh. Haven't any orders. You mean Christmas night, seh?"

"Yes, to-morrow, Christmas."

"Likely not, seh."

"Where does Mr. Maxwell live?"

"Plainville, seh."

"Humph! Do you wish to make a ten-dollar bill, janitor? Very well.

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Take a carriage and drive out to Plainville as tight as you can fetch it, and find out if Mr. Thomas Wiggin—he knows me—can have the hall to-morrow night. Tell Mr. Maxwell that if he'll meet me at my rooms at eight o'clock to-morrow, Christmas morning, I'll add twenty-five per cent. to the price. Do you understand? Now repeat what I've said to you. That's right. Go along now and report to me at the Blackstone Club as soon as you get back, and for every five minutes which you take from an hour and a half I'll add an extra dollar to the ten."

Tom looked at his watch reflectively. It was a quarter past seven. He must dine first, if only not to break faith with Frazer Bell, whom he had kept waiting abominably long already.

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He stopped an instant, however, at the office on his way to join Frazer, so as to make sure that he could have the large green dining-room for the following evening.

"To-morrow's Christmas, you know, Mr. Wiggin?" suggested the steward, respectfully.

"I know it, Dunklee. Is there any reason why I shouldn't give a dinner party on Christmas-day?"

"No, sir, of course not. I merely thought that perhaps you were going to dine elsewhere and had forgotten it was Christmas-day."

"I dine here, and—I wish a dinner for, say sixteen—I can't tell the precise number yet—a ladies' dinner. And I wish it to be as handsome as possible. You mustn't fail me," he added, noticing that the steward

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looked rather dismayed. "Start your messengers at once and spare no expense, if you have to drag the butchers from their beds to get what you need. I'll see to the flowers myself; I have a greenhouse in my mind's eye which I intend to buy solidly for the occasion."

"Very well, Mr. Wiggin, I'll do my best, though it's late to begin, sir."

Frazer Bell was sitting before his raw oysters the picture of polite despair, seeing in his mind's eye the delicate dinner which he had ordered being done to death and getting lukewarm.

"My dear fellow, I owe you a thousand pardons, but I had to telephone. If our dinner is spoiled, or whether it is or not, I want you to promise to dine with me to-morrow night. I

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have evolved a scheme while we were waiting, which I will unfold to you presently. Go on with your oysters. I hope you will forgive me."

"To-morrow, Christmas?"

"Yes. I propose to give an entertainment to all the old bachelors and maiden ladies of my acquaintance, if they'll come. A dinner here followed by a dance at Albion Hall, and Dunklee is arranging for the dinner. I'm going to invite all the old timers, and I need your advice as to the list. For a starter I'll put down the three Bellknap girls."

Tom whipped out his pencil and proceeded to utilise the back of the bill of fare which Frazer had had drawn up to gloat over.

"See first what you're going to eat, old man."

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"It's sure to be admirable if you ordered it. It has always been a matter of wonder to me that neither of those Bellknap girls has married. Then there's Georgiana Dixon, in the same block. Glad I remembered her. Charming girl too. She ought to have been married years ago. Come to think of it, you used to be a friend of hers, Frazer."

"Yes, I did. What on earth are you up to, Tom? Are you in earnest?"

"Never more so in my life. I tell you there's a tacit conspiracy in this town—I dare say all over the planet—against us poor wretches who are old enough to be married and haven't. They—the married ones, I mean—like to keep us out in the cold, as a sort of punishment, maybe, because we've chosen to remain single. I'm

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sick of it for one, and I'm going to organise a revolution. I'm going to have a grand family meeting of all the poor lonely spirits like you and me and the Bellknap girls and Georgiana Dixon and George Hapgood, and—and the things-in-law may go to the devil. Now put your wits on this thing, Frazer, while you disintegrate your terrapin. Come, girls first."

"Do you suppose they'll ever come?" asked Frazer, with an amazed grin. He was essentially a conventional man without a spark of imagination, and he could scarcely believe that Tom was really in earnest.

"They've got to come. Why shouldn't they come?"

"They'll think it queer."

"It isn't queer. It's righteous."

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"All right. Put down Miss Mamie Scott. She will never see thirty again."

"Capital. Poor soul! A girl to make any man happy."

"There's Susan Davis."

"To be sure. She isn't pretty, but she's good. Joe Elliott used to be partial to her before he ran a rig with that smug-faced doll who jilted him. What a fool he was! We'll ask him too."

To tell the truth, even the *gastro-nomic* Frazer Bell, in spite of the fact that the dinner was very far from spoiled, presently forgot what he was eating and drinking in the absorbing process of selection. By the time the cheese and a rare glass of Burgundy arrived the list was finished, and Tom was eager to escape to the reading-

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room to prepare the notes of invitation, which must be sent at once. There were forty-six in all to be invited, out of which he hoped to secure enough for a full-fledged dinner party. Those who could not come to dinner were to be urged to join them at Albion Hall later.

The matter of wording the invitation was a serious one, and Tom sat feeling of the bald spot on his crown for several minutes. At last, with a desperate air he plunged his pen into the inkstand and wrote as follows to Miss Madeline Bellknap:

"MY DEAR MISS BELLKNAP: I beg as a favour that you and both your sisters will honour me with your company at dinner tomorrow, December 25th, at the Blackstone Club, at seven o'clock. I am bringing together, in celebration of a bachelor's Christmas, a number of kindred spirits who

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have no things-in-law to cater to their sympathetic needs, and yet who have a no less equal right to a merry Christmas. After dinner we shall adjourn to Albion Hall to dance, to which I trust that you or some of you, if unable to dine with me, will come at ten o'clock. With the compliments of the season and hoping sincerely that you will oblige me, I am,

“Very truly yours,

“THOMAS WIGGIN.”

“How is that, Frazer?”

“I guess it's all right,” said Frazer, in a tone which suggested that he was far from sure whether it was not all wrong.

“Perfectly respectful and to the point, isn't it?”

“Yes. Hold on, Tom. How about a chaperon? They won't come without a chaperon.”

Tom bit his lip. “I won't have a

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chaperon. I'll be —— if I will have a chaperon." He puckered his brow gloomily; then, with a sudden wave of his hand, he cried,

"I have it."

Thereupon he dashed off this postscript:

"P. S.—We are all old enough to take care of ourselves."

For the next two hours Tom and Frazer devoted themselves with feverish industry to the task of writing the two-score invitations. In such an emergency forgery seemed allowable, and, without attempting to imitate the Wiggin chirography, Frazer boldly signed the name of Thomas. As soon as every half-dozen notes were finished they were hurried to their destination by special messengers. The clock struck half-past ten

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when the last was done. Tom handed over to the boy in attendance the final batch, all save a single one. While he was writing this he could have written half a dozen of the others, and now that it was written and addressed he drew it from the envelope to read once more the words which he had penned so carefully. Their tenor was essentially the same, but he had stricken out a phrase or two here, and added a phrase or two there, to make sure that she would understand the nature of the invitation. Then he arose with it in his hand and said, "Good-night, Frazer. A thousand thanks. I'll leave this one myself. Wish you merry Christmas."

III

AT half-past six on the evening of Christmas-day Tom Wiggin stood in the large green dining-room of the Blackstone Club, surveying a magnificently appointed table. Roses, pansies, and violets from the greenhouse which he had bought out at ten o'clock that morning, lay tastefully banked and scattered upon the cloth, intertwined with masses of evergreen and holly gay with berries. Christmas wreaths and festoons were lavishly arranged around the walls Dunklee had assured him that there should be no dearth of palatable

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viands, and, most important fact of all, there had been twenty acceptances for dinner, happily just ten men and ten women, and nearly a dozen more acceptances for the dance. He had been in a mad whirl since daybreak, but he believed now that he had accomplished everything except to arrange the seats at table, which needed a little quiet reflection.

The answers had begun to arrive shortly after breakfast. The first had been a refusal, a little curt and stiff in tone, as though the lady in question, notwithstanding the fact that she had promised to dine with one of her family, wished to give him to understand that she took herself too seriously to accept such an invitation under any circumstances. Tom's heart sank within him, and he said

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to himself that he had made a mess of it. Five minutes later his features were as complacent as those of a Cheshire cat. The Misses Bellknap were coming, all three of them. They had ordered dinner at home, but were coming notwithstanding, to help Mr. Wiggin pass a merry Christmas and confound the things-in-law.

"They are three noble sports," Tom had said, as he danced around his apartment waving the mildly scented note.

Other answers came thick and fast. Of course many had engagements, but most of these expressed deep regret at their inability to attend, and several who could not come to dinner promised to put in an appearance at the dance. There were a few other chilling refusals. Miss Susan

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Davis, whom Tom had characterised as not pretty but good, let him perceive very plainly that she considered the invitation indelicate. On the other hand, Miss Mamie Scott, who would never see thirty again, had written him spiritedly that it was a comfort to know that she was old enough to take care of herself, and that she was coming without her mother for the first time in her life.

And she? Tom had not heard until nearly noon, and he had realised, as he held the little neatly sealed note in his hand, that if she were going to fail him his pleasure in the whole business would be utterly gone. His wrist shook as though he had the palsy, and he hated to look. She was coming; yes, she was coming. Her father and mother were going to dine

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with her brother-in-law, and though she had promised to do the same she thought she would enjoy better the very original dinner to which he had invited her. "And, as you say," she wrote in conclusion, "we are certainly old enough to take care of ourselves." She was coming; yes, she was coming, and whatever happened now, he was going to have a merry Christmas.

And how was he to seat them? It was rather a nice problem. To begin with, Tom sandwiched in George Hapgood between the eldest Miss Bellknap and Miss Mamie Scott, which was as delightful a situation as any man could wish to have. Frazer Bell must go beside Georgiana Dixon, and Harry Abercrombie, who had been dangling for years in the train of Angelina Phillips until everybody

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was tired, should take her in and have the second Miss Bellknap on his other side. Tom was making pretty good progress, but what really troubled him was whether it would do for him to place Isabelle Hardy next to himself. Would not such a proceeding be quite inconsistent with the vow which he had been living up to for the past five years? What sense would there be in putting himself in the way of temptation, when he knew perfectly well that she did not care a button for him? What use, indeed? And yet, as he said to himself, Christmas comes but once a year, and this was his party, and—and had not she herself stated that they certainly were old enough now to take care of themselves? Why shouldn't he sit next to her? He was no longer the senti-

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mental, hot-headed boy of five years ago. They would enjoy themselves like any other sober bachelor and old maid. It would only be for one evening, and beginning with to-morrow he would stick to his vow as sturdily as ever. Yes, he would take in the eldest Miss Bellknap, who would be the oldest woman present, and he would put Isabelle Hardy on his left.

When he had made this important decision Tom found the arrangement of his other guests a simple matter, and after one final scrutinising, but tolerably contented, glance around the table, he walked into the ladies' drawing-room to await the arrival of his company.

Punctually on the stroke of seven, the three Misses Bellknap swept into the room in a merry flutter. They

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were tall bean-poles of girls, who had naturally a prancing style, and they were in their very best bib and tucker, which included great puffed sleeves and nodding plumes in their hair. In one breath they told Tom that they considered it a grand idea, that they had been practically nowhere for years, and that it was a real pleasure to be thought of and taken down from the shelf, if only for a single evening. It was evident that they had come determined to have at least a good time, if not a riot, for when their eyes rested on George Hapgood standing in the doorway the picture of blank amazement, all three giggled convulsively as though they were eighteen.

"Come in, George, don't be afraid," said Tom. "They won't bite."

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"We really won't hurt you, Mr. Hapgood," said Miss Madeline, the eldest; "do come in."

It was too late for the woman-hater to draw back now, so, like the man he was, he braced his muscles and faced the music. He bowed with grave courtesy to the youngest Miss Bellknap; he bowed with a faint smile—just a ghostly glimmer, but, nevertheless, a smile—to Miss Arabella, the second Miss Bellknap; and when he faced the eldest Miss Bellknap, who happening to be the farthest away from him was the last to be reached, his features broke down completely, and he positively laughed—laughed for the first time in twenty years.

"Do shake hands, Mr. Hapgood," said Miss Madeline; "this is like old times."

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And now everybody began to arrive in a bunch in the midst of a general handshaking and chorus of merriment. The arrival of each old stager, masculine or feminine, was greeted with fresh exclamations of delight, and a spirit of contagious frivolity was rampant from the very start.

Tom was already bubbling over with enjoyment, but his eyes were glued on the doorway. There she was at last, looking—yes, looking younger and prettier than he had ever seen her in his life, and dressed bewitchingly. An old maid! It was impossible. It was monstrous.

“It was very good of you to come, Miss Hardy.”

“I am very much pleased to be here, Mr. Wiggin.”

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Most conventional phraseology, and there was really no reason why Tom should keep repeating the words over to himself in a dazed sort of fashion until he was called to account by the opening of the doors.

"Dinner is served, sir."

Then readjusting his faculties, Tom gave his arm to Miss Madeline Bellknap, every Jack did the same to his appointed Jill, and the company filed gaily into the dining-room.

Beginning with the oysters, there was almost a pandemonium of conversation, and tongues wagged fast and eagerly. There were to be no speeches—Tom had determined on that—or rather only a single one, and this was an after-thought. When the champagne was passed, and all the glasses were filled, Tom rose in his

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seat. Every one stopped talking, and there was an expectant hush.

"I wish to offer a toast," he said, "a toast for the old bachelors to drink. Wish you merry Christmas and—and here's to *her*!"

There was a brief pause, and then George Hapgood, and in his wake the whole table, rose like one man and emptied their brimming glasses.

"Here's to *her*!"

Tom did not look to right nor to left, not even out of the corner of his eye, as he drained to the last drop the sparkling wine. He would keep to his vow and drink to her in secret. Some of the ladies giggled slightly, and all looked at their plates. It was just a little awkward, even for the most unattached, until Miss Madeline Bellknap rose, glass in hand, and said

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valiantly, with a wave of her napkin:

“My dears, I give you a toast for you to drink. Wish you merry Christmas. We are old enough to take care of ourselves; and—and here’s to *him!*”

Then there was babel. The women stood up to a woman, and the toast was consummated.

Miss Hardy laughed gaily with the rest. Presently she turned to Tom and said, as if it had suddenly occurred to her, though they had been sitting side by side talking common-places ever since dinner began:

“I have not really seen you for years, Mr. Wiggin.”

“I have been busy—very busy,” said Tom, in a tone which, though he did not intend it to be so, was almost brusque.

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"So I have heard. I understand you have been very successful in your business."

"I have stuck to it, that's all."

"I really don't think we have met so as to talk together since Mrs. Carter's ball, and that was—let me see—five years ago this coming New Year's eve. I remember we danced the german together, and—you sent me some flowers which I didn't carry. Perhaps you have forgotten all about it, for five years is a long time and you have been so busy; but I should like to explain to you about those flowers—why I didn't carry them. We are both old enough now to take care of ourselves, so there can't be any objection to my telling you, and—and you won't be offended at this late day, I'm sure. I had several bou-

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quets that night, and Fannie Pingree, who was staying with me, had none. Fannie was shy and sensitive, and it occurred to me to offer one of mine to her. She wouldn't think of it at first, but mother urged her so strongly that she gave in at last. 'Which shall I take, Isabelle?' she asked. I thought a moment and then said, 'Take your pick, Fannie.' And she chose yours. And that is why I didn't carry it to the party. But I think you have forgotten all about it, Mr. Wiggin."

Tom looked as though he had. His chin rested on his collar, and he seemed to be staring at the tablecloth.

"I remember it as if it were yesterday," he said, sadly. "I was a fool."

Miss Hardy coloured. "We were

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both young," she answered, "but now that we are older and wiser, I don't mind admitting on my side that it was stupid of me, to begin with, to give one of my bouquets to anybody, and stupid when I saw that you were put out not to tell you the truth. But wisdom is the reward of years, isn't it?" She talked easily, almost gaily. Tom suddenly realised that he had made a piece of bread which he had been clutching into a sodden ball.

"I'd like to ask you a single question." He was trying to talk easily too. "Why did you let Miss Pingree have her pick? Did you value them all equally?"

"It was because I did not value them all equally that I told her to choose. I did not wish her to think that I cared for one more than the others."

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“And whose was that?”

“Five years is a long time, Mr. Wiggin. You said a single question, and this is two. Alas! It is the only point in the story which I have quite forgotten.”

“Then why did you tell me?”

“Because I hoped that we might be friends again. When people get to be as old as you and I we value our old friends. There are none exactly like them.”

“And that is all?”

“What more is there, Mr. Wiggin? Except to thank you for your lovely book, and to wish you a merry Christmas.”

“The carriages are waiting,” said a servant in Tom’s ear.

The dinner was over and it was time to set out for Albion Hall. The ladies

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filed into the drawing-room, in order, as Miss Madeline phrased it, to give the old bachelors a chance for a short cigar. When that was over Tom bundled his company into carriages, and away they all went in the gayest of spirits.

Whatever belonging to the greenhouse had not been spread over the dinner-table adorned the walls of the dancing-room, and presently as joyous and hilarious a company as any one would wish to see was tripping to the rhythm of the waltz over a perfect floor. There was just the right number for delightful dancing, no young inexperienced couples to bump into everybody, no things-in-law to stand in the way and look stupid; no one but genuine old stagers taken down from the shelf for one last

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glorious frolic. You should have seen George Hapgood spinning round with Miss Madeline! How Frazer Bell grinned as he whirled Miss Mamie Scott from one corner of the hall to the other! And Tom? Where was Tom?

As some of you who have danced at Albion Hall may remember, there is a very small bower-like ante-room, or offshoot, or whatever you choose to call it, a sort of adjunct to the supper-room, fit for just one couple to withdraw to. On this Christmas evening it was a veritable hiding-place, for the entrance to it was screened by two noble evergreens which stood as sentinels to demand a password. If the gay company suspected that Tom Wiggin was there, no one was rash enough to peep within and ascertain.

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Tom Wiggin *was* there, and quite contrary to the spirit of the occasion, he was down on his knees unbosoming the love which he had been smothering for five years to the girl of his heart. Only think of it! And he, a bald-headed old bachelor, and she an old maid old enough to take care of herself. There she sat with her hands before her and a smile on her face, letting him go on. And then, strangest part of all, when he had finished and told how miserable he had been while he was so very busy and absorbed in his business, she suddenly remembered whose bouquet it was she had valued most five years before, although she had declared an hour earlier that she had totally forgotten. And then—but the rest is a secret, known only to the sentinel evergreens

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and themselves. That is, the rest save one thing. It was after they had agreed to live as bachelor and maid no longer, and Tom was sitting looking at Isabelle as if he had had no dinner, he remarked, with a sudden outburst, as though he were angry with destiny and a much outraged being:

"Why on earth did I not find out five years ago that you loved me?"

"Because," said the pretty spinster in question, "you never asked me, Tom, dear."

Tom Wiggin looked a trifle sheepish in spite of his joy. "I never thought of that," he said. "I am afraid I never did."

FEB 9 1913